THE MARRIAGE OF CAPTAIN KETTLE

A Romance of the Sea

By CUTCLIFFE HYNE

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SYNOPSIS OF CAPTAIN KETTLE.

CHAPTER I—The British steamer Norman Towers, commanded by Captain Saturday Farnish, finds itself, through the freak of a crazy engineer, adrift in the Sargasso Sea without coal while en route from Mexico to Liverpool.

CHAPTER II—The first mate, Owen Kettle, sets off in the lifeboat with a crew of ten-necks in the hope of finding a ship that will part with enough of its coal to enable the disabled vessel to reach Liverpool. Its name is the steamer Rhein.

CHAPTER III—But the Rhein refuses to stop. A woman on board, Miss Violet Chesterman, sees the dirty deed, and influences a fireman, McTodd, to disable the engines.

CHAPTER IV—Owen Kettle then overtakes the Rhein, clambers into its side with his crew, forcibly assumes charge of the vessel, and navigates it to the point where the Norman Towers is drifting, and which he re-coals.

CHAPTER V—Arrival of the Norman Towers at Liverpool. Miss Kettle surreptitiously drops out of the ship into the river Mersey in order to save his captain from a possible scandal because of the inadequacy of his coal supply and too much liquor supply. Two river pirates assault and rob Kettle and leave him badly injured. Is rescued and nursed back to health by Miss Dubbs, barmaid at the Mason's Arms.

CHAPTER VI—Owen Kettle engages with Sir George Chesterman to go as captain of the Wangaroo and sketch the African coast for an abandoned ship laden with metal of great value.

CHAPTER VII—In Liverpool Captain Kettle meets McTodd, the man who had disabled the engines of the Rhein, and signs him as one of the crew of the Wangaroo.

CHAPTER VIII—In Las Palmas harbor Miss Dubbs appears on board the Wangaroo a stowaway. Ostensibly at the suggestion of Sir George, but really because she wished to be near Captain Kettle, with whom she is in love and to whom she is engaged. Miss Violet Chesterman also becomes a passenger.

CHAPTER IX—The Wangaroo cruises up and down the West African seaboard, and Captain Kettle finally locates the missing treasure ship in an almost wholly hidden bay. She proves to be the old Norman Towers.

(Now go on with the story.)

"I don't agree with you a bit. Remember I knew Fred as well or better than you did, and he hadn't a particle of imagination in the whole of his composition. He was the most literal, matter-of-fact sort of person that ever bungled a medical practice. Don't you agree with me, Captain?"

"Miss," said Captain Kettle, "I'm a man without imagination myself. Sir George showed me the letter, and I read it eight times over, and saw nothing in it but plain, straightforward statement of facts. We may, through my want of skill and eyesight, fail to find the spot he speaks about, or he may have gone badly adrift in his longitude, but I'll stake my ticket on it that he say what he says he saw."

Amusement flickered in Sir George's tired eyes. "You're quite an enthusiast, Skipper. Well, Violet, if you can stick it out for another week, I suppose I can, too. The skipper must try and make things as easy for us as he can manage it."

"I quite agree to the last proviso," said Miss Chesterman mischievously.

Mile by mile to the northward, the Wangaroo searched during the hours of daylight, lying-to at night so as not to overrun her ground in the dark, and one blazing day succeeded another without tangible result. But in the cool of one evening, success arrived at last. A hail came from the look-out nest which was perched up higher under the fore truck. "The bridge there."

"Aye."

"D'ye see a hummock broad on the starboard bow, sir,—just on the edge of the coast? Seems to me two colors, sir—Mustard-yellow and blue."

"That'll be the sunset, you fool!" said the elderly second mate from the bridge. "I can't see it myself. Wait till I get the glasses."

The look-out man in the crow's nest on the main-mast took up the take, and the pair bawled down their news dingdong.

"There's water in at the back of that land, sir."

"River mouth, sir."

"Looks to me a lagoon, sir."

"There's water on beyond again, sir. I just then got a glimpse of it as she rolled."

"There's an island off the coast, or a row of them."

"What you see is not the coast, sir—or, at any rate, there's a big river in at the back of it."

"There's a lagoon stretching right along. You can pick out points of it where the sun catches the water."

The old mate stared through his glasses, but naturally could make out nothing, as the lower edge of the shore line was well below his horizon, and so in the end he contented himself with the curt, "Aye, aye," of acknowledgment.

He was a stupid man, and prided himself on his stupidity. He was hired (according to his theory) to act as second mate of a 750-ton steamboat, and not to make discoveries.

But Captain Kettle at the first note of news had, walked briskly along the immaculate decks, had swung himself into the fore rigging, and had run nimbly aloft, and presently, passing outside the barrel which formed the crow's nest, stood on the upper edges of it with an arm round the masthead just beneath the truck.

Those on deck saw him there, a small, white-clad figure, swaying backward and forward against the evening sky, and peering dexterously through a long telescope at the shore and what lay beyond. Voices stopped. The Wangaroo slipped through the swells in silence, except for the dull internal rumble of her engines. All owned afterward to having felt a curious premonitory thrill.

To those who watched, Kettle seemed maddeningly slow. They watched his long telescope saw up and down in constant arc as the steamer rolled, they watched him pick up the invisible ground beyond their horizon and examine it, as it seemed, foot by foot, and then he swung back and commenced the search all over again.

Sir George tried to break the tension. "Well, Skipper," he hailed. "Is that the place?"

"Couldn't say, sir," came the chilly reply, and again the audience watched the telescope plod slowly over the coast-line. The sun, in a ball of scarlet fire, was sinking in invisible inches below the western horizon, and Captain Kettle's white drill uniform was tinted pink by the afterglow.

But presently from the masthead came the hail, "Mr. Forster!"

"Sir?" said the fat old second mate.

"D'ye see that hummock lying about due east, with the stripes on it and a table top? Just take a bearing."

The second mate peered at the mark and then squinted down at the binnacle. "East by south a quarter east, sir."

"Can you open out any land behind it?"

The old fellow peered again. "No, sir. The hummock's on my sky-line, with a clean edge to it."

"Very good. Then call away the surf-boat, and get water and some biscuit into her."

Captain Kettle came down to deck aloft, as briskly as he had gone up, and it was typical of him that he did not make any pronouncement to satisfy the curiosity of his crew. Instead, he went quietly to where Sir George sat with his sister, and gave the news to them.

"There's a regular fishing-net of islands in at the back there. I can see no trace of our steamer, but it's quite possible she's there. Many of the islands are a tidy size, and she might easily be tucked in at the back and out of sight. I can't take the steamer in without a lot of sounding, so I'm going off in the boat."

"Not yourself? Not by night?" It was Miss Chesterman who raised the objection.

"It will be cooler for the men for one thing, miss, and in a couple of hours from now when the moon's up, it will be just as easy to see as in daylight."

"You'd better go, too, Violet. If you think the skipper needs chaperoning."

"I'd love to."

"The dew'll be very heavy, miss, drenching, in fact. Besides, if we find what we are looking for, we shall have to do a lot of sounding, and I may be away a couple of days. I couldn't undertake to look after a lady all that time in an open boat."

"Oh, all right," said Miss Chesterman, and frowned at her brother, who had caught her eye behind Captain Kettle's back and winked. That officer had gone to the side to see if the boat's company and the rest of her equipment were to his taste, and presently returned to his room for a revolver and a bottle of Horner's Perfect Cure, which he stowed in his outside pockets.

"The drug's a guard against malaria, sir," he explained. "Sea chills just about twilight are very dangerous in this climate. I shall give all hands of my boat's crew a lot of Horner presently, and you'll see they'll never turn a hair. Mr. Mate, I leave you in charge. I may be gone up to three days. Hang on here till then, and if we don't turn up, send in another boat, well armed. It's just possible we may get split in the surf or stove on a reef, and need fetching off. Miss Chesterman and Sir George, I wish you good evening. With luck, I hope to be back on board here again before breakfast."

A naked rope dangling down the Wangaroo's steep black side was the only highroad to the boat, and Mr. Kettle went down it nimbly hand over hand, walking with his feet against the ship's plating. From bow and stern the guess warp was dropped, and boatbooks thrust the boat out from the ship's side; oars rose and fell into the water and settled comfortably between their thole-pins; and at "Give way" the oars bit the surface as one machine, and the boat gathered way.

"Good luck," shouted Sir George from the rail, and Miss Chesterman, with moist eyes waved an atom of handkerchief, and the black retriever swung a thoughtful tail. Captain Kettle waved in return, and then his boat sought a lower level, and ran into two or three of the round cabin windows. Apparently he saw what he sought for there, for he waved something and lifting his nose fancied he scented in the air the faint trace of the frangipani which Miss Dubbs affected for her toilet.

The watchers followed the surf-boat with their eyes till night snapped down with tropical suddenness; and as at the same time the steamer's lights were kindled, and dazzled the eye, the boat vanished into the gloom which had come down to cover the sea.

Violet Chesterman shivered. "I believe I'm afraid," she said. "Anyway, it's quite a new feeling, and I can't think what else it can be."

The trade-wind freshened till it blew a gale, and the little Wangaroo, a small speck in that great turmoil of water, with her engines slowed down till they just held her in position, rolled, and bucked, and plunged, and pitched, till more than one expert thought that she would heave her masts overboard. Everything on board of her, from coals and shovels, to dinner plates and hair-brushes, kept up its own separate noisy dance, and even the most hardened of her human complement was nauseated with her dizzy lunging.

Night dragged through, and day came, and still the reinforced trade blew with unabated force, and the little steamboat continued her dizzy dance. The wind blew hot now instead of chill, and presently (as the sun climbed higher) gave one the idea that it had been passed through a super-heating apparatus before it was let loose on the Wangaroo. It was laden, too, with a fine grit which lodged in all the steamer's crannies on deck and below. In the morning coffee, in the eyes, in the bearings of the machinery, in Miss Chesterman's black hair, in the apple tart, which the cook baked for luncheon, and (this most emphatically) in the innermost mechanism of everybody's temper.

But when at last the blazing afternoon drew to a close, the wind eased and the sand-storm dropped; and on the edge of the night the surf-boat was sighted putting out from behind a shoulder of the land.

It seemed to the women who watched, that no small boat could live in that run of sea, but she held stolidly on, her oars like the legs of some uncouth insect beating the water rhythmically. The faces of her people, when they came near enough to be seen, were woodenly unconcerned; and when the acrobatic feat of getting her alongside, hooking on, and hauling her up to davits had to be performed, one might have taken it (from the looks of the actors) to be an ordinary concern of every-day life instead of one of the smartest pieces of sea juggling on record.

"By God! Skipper," said Sir George "you've given us all a bad time. I never thought you'd get on board again in one piece. The sea's awful."

"I take the sea as I find it, sir, and don't complain. My boat crew's passably efficient. I will say that for them."

"Well," said Sir George, rather piqued, "if we were sick with anxiety I'd like to point out you don't look too brisk yourself. You look as if you'd seen a ghost."

"If there were such things, I'd have seen one surely. We've found your steamboat, sir. You remember her name?"

"You've found her, have you?" Well, now, that's capital hearing, and almost worth all we've gone through. Her name, do you say? Was it washed out or something? Her name? I suppose I must have come across it somewhere. I remember my solicitors dug it out for me. But I'm afraid I've forgotten it; I've a rotten memory for names. However, if it's of importance, we can easily turn it up."

"I can tell you her name, sir. She's the old Norman Towers. Her master, Captain Farnish, with his wife, brought me up from the time I was a little kid of two years old, and those two were about the best friends I had got in the world, and better friends than most men ever had. Captain Farnish, I suppose, is drowned, and seeing what's happened to his ship, that's the best thing that could occur to him. But as for ghosts, if there were such things, I should have seen his when I went on board. In the chart house there was a red velvet chair with a caster off that I've known for years, and the old lady's portrait, and his pipe—his frowsy old meerschaum pipe—I say his pipe—sir, I mean his pipe! If you'll excuse me, I will go to my room. I feel I need a bit of sleep."

CHAPTER X.

Disengagement.

"I'M dreadfully sorry," said Sir George next morning, "that I didn't think of telling you the steamer's name. It didn't seem to me important, and, in fact, as I've told you, I forgot it. I knew, of course, the details of my sister's escapade when she met you first, but the names of the boats never came into the tale, and until you returned aboard here off that ghastly surf-boat, and scared us all out of our wits last night, she'd never had the curiosity to inquire the name of the ship my unlucky cousin had interested us in. It all sounds perfectly impossible, of course—"

"But as you know by this time," Miss Chesterman cut in, "what a dear old muddler my brother is over business matters. I'm sure you'll understand how it came about."

"Miss," said Captain Kettle, "and, sir, I'm grateful for what you say. I was a good deal upset last night. But I don't see that even if I'd known that it was the poor old Towers we were after it would have made any real difference. With the knowledge in my pocket I couldn't have looked for her more keenly, nor would my duty to my owner have made me look less hard, and there you are. I should have taken on the billet just the same, and glad of it, even if you'd told me the old girl's name that first night at the Mason's Arms, back there in Preston. It's been a jar to find that my old sea-daddy's drowned, and me thinking him sailing the seas, with his false teeth in his chart-room drawer, as merry as ever: but I guess sailors are paid to drown when necessary, and there, if you please, we'll leave it. Question is now, taking this steamboat in through those reefs. It's going to be a job and a half."

"Can't you manage it?"

"Sir, with respect, I can take any steamboat that's built through any channel where there's water enough to float her. But when I'm put to being my own pilot, I've got to survey the channel first."

"But surely you know the way now, after being in and out?"

"There's a vast difference, miss, between dodging through in a rowboat that will float in two feet of water, and taking in a fine craft like this"—Captain Kettle cast his eye proudly over his small command—"that draws thirteen foot two. There must be a channel somewhere because, as you know, the old Towers blew in without touching. But the whole place is a regular stone-yard, and I tell you freely that how my surf-boat escaped getting smashed a good score of times beats all my experience."

"Is there such a thing as a tide here?"

"Water runs in places like a mill-race, sir. But my idea is there's a proper fairway, and there's nothing to do but take the ground, square by square, in that surf-boat, and plot out the whole scheme of the banks and reefs with as many cross-bearings as one can get. Then, with some leading marks built ashore, and perhaps a buoy or two if the channels get very twisted, I'll be able, if the weather gives us a fair smooth sea, to take her in."

"And how long will this entertainment take?"

"A week, sir, at the very lowest estimate, and perhaps two if it breezes up again. It it comes to narrow soundings, a man can't get accurate depths when he doesn't know if the sea's lifting him a couple of fathoms above the normal, or dropping him twelve feet beneath it."

"Good Lord, Skipper, you can't expect us to stay and he seasick here for another month's week."

"I was going to say, sir, that we're low on coal, and have made a big hole in the water and stores. It would be best if you'd take the Wangaroo back to the islands for bunkers and provisions. You'll be back here again before I'm ready. And you'll find Mr. Trethewy a perfectly competent navigator, and you'll not miss the six men I want to keep."

"And leave you here to grill in that twopenny boat? My dear fellow, that comes inside the cruelty clause. We couldn't sleep for thinking of you. Don't you agree, Violet?"

"I shall take along a spare awning and a couple of spars to make a tent, and I marked down in my eye an island that's just the place for a camp. There didn't seem to be fuel, so we shall need a couple of bags of coal, but with those and rations we shall be comfortable enough till you return; and indeed, sir, if you come to think the business out, there's no other way for it."

So the scheme was agreed to, and Kettle fitted his boat, and went below to say good-by to Miss Dubbs before making his adieus to her employers on deck.

But that stately young person gave him a very chilly reception. She was tastly civil, one might almost say offensively so, but as far as a temperature of some eighty-three degrees Farenheit would permit, her conversation was ice.

A sentence or two passed before Captain Kettle observed this. As has been recorded before, their mode of addressing one another was always designedly formal, and at first he thought that the lady's remarks were built on this model, and not studiously designed to denote offense.

But presently she left him beyond possible doubt as to her meaning.

"I would have you understand, Captain, that I am not your dear, or anything so familiar. To you, I am either 'Miss Dubbs,' or 'stewardess,' whichever you prefer."

"I told you in Las Palmas harbor how awkward it would be if we were serving together on the same ship and I was captain."

"You did, and it has been very awkward. I felt I intruded, though Miss Violet, to give her due, never let me see she thought so. However, when the pair of you get back to the Norman Towers you will be able to renew old scenes."

"I might have told you before about meeting her out West," said Kettle miserably, "but I thought that was all passed and done with, and never expected to see her again. As you know, it was a perfect surprise to me, her coming to Grand Canary. You were a surprise, too, for that matter."

Miss Dubbs elaborate black hair seemed fairly to bristle. "Ah, now we get to the truth, Captain. I was a surprise, if you like. Plain, indeed, it was you didn't expect to see me, and you never disguised your disappointment. I was the little intruder, wasn't I? And you thought you were going to pick it up again with Miss Violet where you'd left it off, and play her the Moonlight Sonata on the accordion when Sir George was having his after-supper sleep? Oh, don't tell me. Haven't I seen you walking her along the decks, and catching her by the elbow when she made believe she was losing her footing through the roll? Liver wing at dinner, and 'quartermaster, bring aft deck chair for Miss Chesterman'? That's all right. That's her due. That's what you're paid for. But when it comes to piece-laying her white shoes with your own fingers, that's the limit. It's no use denying it. I saw you at 'em through your own port-hole. Even a stewardess must come on deck sometimes."

"I deny nothing that I have done. I appreciated the shoes because the steward can't do it decently, and won't learn. I'll clean yours, too, if you'll let me."

"No one touches my shoes but my husband, which is what you'll never be. Here's your engagement ring."

"You'd better keep it."

"If you'd prefer should give it to the other girl instead of to you say so. Pah!" said Miss Dubbs, swelling out her chest. "You can't think how I despise you, Captain. No, don't try to stop me; I'm going to my room."

It was then, with the dismal knowledge that the matter of his engagement had gone hopelessly awry that Captain Kettle, in a surf-boat laden with men, coal bags, meat tins, water beakers, hard tack sacks, rifles, rope, ammunition, canvas, sounding leads, and other cargo put off from the Wangaroo, which forthwith turned her tail on him and steamed away to sea. Twelve very strenuous days passed over his head before he was able to rejoin her.

CHAPTER XI.

A Channel of the Lagoon.

AFTER strenuous battling with seas flogged by the trade, the Wangaroo steamed up once more to her station off the African coast, and hooted impressively on her siren to announce arrival. That enormous siren, replacing one of the normal caliber for a seven-hundred-fifty-ton boat, was an extravagance which Captain Kettle almost coyly had wheedled out of the steamboat's canny owner before leaving the Tyne.

A stained red ensign on the top of a pole which was perched on the crown of a striped sand-dune blew out by way of answer, but the boat did not come out on that day or any of the three succeeding days. At intervals Miss Chesterman said she heard firing, but her brother, who prided himself on knowing a gun-shot when he heard one, said that the noise was caused by the surf on the abounding reefs. The black-haired Miss Dubbs strained her eyes toward the shore till black shadows grew beneath them, but what opinions she had on the matter she kept to herself.

On the twelfth day the surf-boat came out, handled very dashingly under sail, ran with much smartness alongside, and emitted a spruce and sun-scorched Captain Kettle.

After salutations had passed, a meeting was called in the privacy of the chart house.

"Miss," said the little sailor, "I'm free to own I'm sorry to see you. I've been hoping all these days you'd have stayed behind in Las Palmas. And now, sir, the best advice I can give is that we run back and leave Miss Violet where she ought to be."

"What's wrong with the Norman Towers?"

"Just this, sir. The Moors think she's their ship."

"And you're going to let it rest at that?"

Captain Kettle, as far as the action of the sun on his complexion would allow, flushed. "I thought, sir, you knew me better. The Norman Towers is your ship, and you're going to have her to realize on, as per contract, but there may possibly be a little trouble before we get her out, and I thought better that Miss Violet should be spared seeing it."

"Danger, Captain, do you mean?"

"No, miss. I prefer to call it trouble."

"Well, if you're appealing to me my answer is that I shan't go back. And if you're trying to influence my brother, he will tell you he's attempted ever since I was in short frocks to make me do as he liked and has invariably failed. So unless you've other and stronger arguments to bring to bear, I'm afraid you must still continue to put up with me as a member of your crew. Stewardess, aren't I, by the way the same as Du—— on the same official footing, I mean, as Miss Dubbs?"

"I didn't see any other capacity under which to sign you on, miss. The Board of Trade is very strict in these matters, and if you don't conform in the proper way and put in the fool entries they want on the crew sheet, and can't go to sleep over, there's a correspondence started, that'll last a ship's master half a life-time."

"Hadn't you better tell us exactly what you did find ashore?"

"That would be the best way, sir. Well, to begin with, from here is not the coast, but a chain of small islands and reefs and sand-banks running along parallel to the edge of the mainland, sometimes a hundred yards away from it sometimes two miles. The space between where we are now and the main opening is dotted with sand and lumps of stone just about as thick as the black squares on a draught-board, but not a bit regular. How the old Towers blew in there without touching—or, if she touched, without breaking up—is more than I can tell you. If I was an imaginative man I should say that the simplest explanation was that she grew wings and flew in over the top. As I'm not that, the only thing I can think of is, the Lord saw it was best for some one that she should get inside, and He sent a leading wind, and steered her Himself. However, there she's got, and I must say that as far as the eye can tell she seems as round as a bottle."

"But didn't you get on board to make a full examination?"

"I did not, miss, this time. The Moors had taken possession, and as there were at least six hundred of them on her decks when we hove in sight, and as I'd only six of a crew in the surf-boat, I concluded to leave them where they were for the time being."

"And they shot at you? There, George, I told you those were shots we heard."

"The Norman Towers has a couple of brass signal guns, miss, and they must have brought some of their own powder on board, and used some for shot. I suppose the noise and the powder smell pleased them, and the stones certainly didn't hit us, so all was well. If there'd been need, of course I should have gone on board, but as we were, so to speak, merely a reconnoitering expedition, and our job was to do a survey of the channel, I concluded to let them enjoy their war-dance in peace. All the same, I've got the idea there's a white man directing them."

"How's that?"

"They're showing more savvy than it's good for diggers to possess. And they're looking ahead, and that's a thing even outside the ordinary colored man's contract. What do you suppose there would be on board that any Moor would care to loot? A few movables that would perhaps add up to five or six hundred pounds in value. And then when he'd got those, and started to break the port-hole glasses, and the gage glasses, and the few skylight glasses, and smash the door pannels out of sheer light-heartedness, and to throw over board hatch covers and wheel gratings, and other trifles they didn't want, what would be the bill for damage to an old tramp like the Norman Towers? Call it another five hundred pounds. Well, and after that, and when they'd got tired of trampling mud off their slippers into the saloon carpet, and had looked through the reserve coal bunker to make sure that wasn't the treasure room, what would be the next move? Go home with what they'd got, and swap lies about it round the kitchen fire? That would be the ordinary colored man's scheme of enjoyment. And if you asked him if he wouldn't take the steamer and her cargo along while he was there, he'd say he was much obliged, but really he'd got no immediate use for her. Do you follow my argument?

"Yes, that seems all right. But aren't they doing as you say?"

"They're not, sir. They're arranging to hold the Norman Towers for keeps, and I tell you straight we're going to have a tough job in getting her away from them."

"But in wonder's name, what do they want her for?"

"That's what's bothering me, sir. That's why I seem to smell out the white man with the head-piece at the back of this pack of darkies, though even what his game is I can't guess. I tell you I'd be a lot easier if I could, because then one could fix up a plan to upset it, whereas as it is he's getting in all his moves undisturbed."

Sir George squared his big shoulders. "Can you get this boat in moderately close alongside?"

"Right up against her plates, if you want her there."

"Well, what's wrong with pelting your beauties with the rifles to pump lead into every one we see on the Norman Tower's deck till those that are left get sick of it and clear off? Then we proceed to make fast a tow-rope and pull her out, and so across to Las Palmas, where we sell her, for cash down, to some enterprising jiggins who's in need of an antique steamboat and a cargo of copper concentrates, and live happily ever afterward on the proceeds. Sounds beautifully simple."

"Far too simple, sir," said the little sailor emphatically. "I'm just convinced that there's a bad snag waiting for us to run ourselves against it somewhere. And will you please tell me what's the meaning of this? they're quarrying."

(To be Continued)

Take in Theatricals.

Haverhill Herald: The only way taste can be improved is by educating the children. This has been done for years in Germany, where the children have been fed on the German classics, until now the whole nation has been educated to enjoy the best things in dramatic literature. So it is said that now in a single week in Germany more of the plays of Shakespeare than can be seen in the United States in a whole season. And just because larger numbers of people enjoy the best and will pay for the best, it is possible for all to have the best at very small cost.